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Lethality assessment protocol: A qualitative exploratory analysis

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory, qualitative research study examined the perceptions and attitudes police officers expressed regarding successful implementation of the Lethality Assessment Protocol (LAP), a collaborative intervention between police departments and domestic violence advocacy agencies in the State of Connecticut. Focus groups were conducted at four police departments to determine officers' perceptions of the LAP. Officers ($N=27$) were recruited through an individual contact at the police department (LAP Coordinator). Responses to focus group questions identified both aggravating and mitigating factors related to the system-wide and departmental execution of the LAP in domestic violence cases. Officers generally support the protocol and believe it has beneficial intent and purpose. The two major themes gleaned from the research study included implementation and training. Barriers discovered were victim blaming, lack of victim cooperation, and poor training. Positive areas identified included strong commitment to training initiatives, robust relationships between LAP Coordinators and domestic violence agency representatives, and individual officer style regarding their implementation of LAP.

Keywords: lethality assessment, domestic violence, police attitudes, femicide, spousal homicide.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, domestic violence was ignored by the criminal justice system because it was legally, as well as morally, acceptable to abuse and assault one's spouse under most circumstances. The United States court system generally allowed the "physical chastisement" of married women until the 1800s (Stedman, 1996). Even after the 1800s, but still prior to 1980, law enforcement's response to domestic violence was less than desired. Socially, domestic violence was considered a family matter, a private issue, and the law enforcement community also bought into this notion (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Offenders, oftentimes, were not arrested; victims were mainly ignored and little, if anything, was done to provide victims with information and resources about domestic violence services. It was not until the 1980s that the criminal justice system's response to domestic violence took a dramatic turn.

Over the past four decades, there has been an abundance of legislation that addresses the criminal justice response to domestic violence. Earlier legislation focused on mandatory arrest policies and integration of domestic violence dedicated dockets in the court system. Although previous legislative reform spoke to the criminal justice system as a whole, the majority of changes have focused, and continue to focus, on the police response (Hoyle & Sanders, 2000). Since the late 1980s, police response has taken a broad shift from reactive to preventive measures. To fulfill these prevention-related goals, police have increasingly turned to empirically informed practice, more specifically, violence risk assessment instruments, in their fight against this ever growing public epidemic (Storey, Kropp, Hart, Belfrage, & Strand, 2014).

The current study examined police officers' attitudes and perceptions of the lethality assessment protocol (LAP), a new intervention utilized by law enforcement officers in the State of Connecticut when responding to domestic violence calls. This analysis is the second phase of a multiple phase study. Several interventions have been and continue to be utilized in the plight to address domestic violence (e.g. the Danger Assessment, Spousal Assault Risk Assessment, and Domestic Violence Screening Instrument), but LAP is the latest being used by police at the scene of the incident. There have been various risk assessments employed by first responders in the past; however, LAP is the first risk assessment created for first responders that only questions the victim of violence, is designed to predict severe violence/homicide, and is intended to maximize sensitivity (Messing, Campbell, Wilson, Brown, & Patchell, 2015). Many states have experienced significant results with LAP implementation. The success of LAP has been conveyed via decreased rates of intimate partner homicide, increased rates of victims seeking and participating in domestic violence services, and stronger collaborative efforts between law enforcement and local domestic violence agencies (Klein, 2012).

Maryland has had a high success rate in employing this LAP model. In 2015, Maryland law enforcement officers identified 6,124 high-danger victims through the LAP. Of these, 2,742 (45%) immediately spoke with a domestic violence advocate. Of those, 1,582 (58%) took part in additional program services provided through the agency (MNADV, 2016). Other law enforcement agencies throughout the United States have also experienced success in employing the LAP: Kansas City, Missouri; Anoka County, Minnesota; and New York City, New York, to name just a few.

It is important to examine officers' attitudes about domestic violence and domestic violence interventions for several reasons. Researchers have noted that law enforcement officers view their work as being stressful and report frustration, especially when responding to domestic violence calls. These feelings may lead officers to not give new protocols proper attention and,

thereby, hinder implementation. Also, scholars have noted that there is a void in the literature in terms of studies that document law enforcement officer perceptions of domestic violence in general (Grover, Paul, Dodge, 2011; Ruff, 2012). This study aims for a comprehensive examination of our first responder's thoughts and feelings related to the LAP.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intersection of Law Enforcement and Domestic Violence

The most recent research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control reports that 32.9% of women in America (or over 42 million women) have experienced physical violence from an intimate partner at some time in their life. The study also found that 28.2% of men (or over 31 million men) have experienced severe physical violence from an intimate partner at some point (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, Merrick, Chen, & Stevens, 2011). Furthermore, physical intimate partner violence has been found to be a precursor to intimate partner femicide (the killing of women) in 65 to 80% of cases (Campbell, Glass, Sharps, Laughon & Bloom, 2007). These statistics paint a representation of the serious nature and far-reaching extent of domestic violence throughout our country; therefore, as a pervasive social issue, a comprehensive response from agencies across various sectors is necessary.

Over the past several decades, the police response to victims of domestic violence has been criticized as being dismissive and derogatory (Gover, Paul, & Dodge, 2011; Ruff, 2012). These criticisms have resulted in many victims seeking police assistance as a last resort and only after having endured repeated violent attacks (Eigenberg, Kappeler, McGuffee, 2012). While the overall police response to domestic violence has significantly improved throughout the last decade, many domestic violence incidents continue to go unreported by victims due to negative perceptions of the law enforcement response. Furthermore, many victims of domestic violence are ambivalent about calling law enforcement for fear they will not be taken seriously or be believed at all. Even those victims who did involve law enforcement officers were found to be more likely to refuse to make a statement or withdrew statements previously made, thereby severely limiting police intervention (Hoyle, 1998).

General police attitudes and beliefs about domestic violence are likely to influence their reaction to these calls. How the police respond to incidents of domestic violence is significant, especially since they may be encountering a first disclosure or attempt at help-seeking. Therefore, the tenor of their response sends an important and lasting message. One of the factors that has been found to affect an officer's response is their acknowledgement of the likelihood that victims will return to their abusers before ending the abusive relationship. Understandably, officers become frustrated responding to the same cases repeatedly, without much change in the relationship status. This major concern for the desensitization of police officers can be ameliorated by ongoing training that emphasizes the importance of treating each domestic dispute call as the potential life and death matter it is and as if it were their only opportunity to provide intervention (Ruff, 2012). Lethality assessments also have a key role to play in assisting victims to understand the risks associated with their relationships. This intervention tool may then contribute to a long-term reduction of repeat domestic violence calls and, hopefully, to domestic violence incidents overall.

Lethality Assessment Protocol

The Lethality Assessment Protocol (LAP) model created by the Maryland Network Against Domestic Violence in 2005 was employed for more timely intervention and connection to services for victims of this all too pervasive social problem. The LAP is an innovative, two-pronged model designed to assist trained law enforcement officers on the scene of a domestic violence incident to identify victims at the greatest risk of being seriously injured or killed by their intimate partners and to more effectively link them with a local domestic violence agency to receive services. The process is straightforward and begins when an officer arrives at the scene of a domestic violence incident. Officers are trained to use LAP near the end of an investigation involving a past or current intimate relationship, when there is a manifestation of danger, defined by the presence of at least one of the following criteria: (a) the officer believes an assault or other violence act has occurred, whether or not probable cause exists for arrest; (b) the officer is concerned for the safety and well-being of the victim once they leave the scene of the incident; (c) the officer is responding to a domestic violence call from a repeat victim or location of domestic violence; or (d) the officer has a “gut feeling” that the victim is in danger (Campbell, Webster, & Glass, 2009). If the victim’s LAP responses put him/her in the high risk category, the officer places a call to the local domestic violence 24-hour hotline and encourages the victim to speak with the advocate. The advocate can then provide the victim with service information and education, as well as emergency shelter, if needed.

Adoption of lethality assessment programs are on the rise in police departments, requiring police officers responding to an incident of intimate partner violence to work with the victims to determine their risk for death (Klein, 2012). The program implemented in the State of Connecticut is a result of a collaboration between the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence (CCADV) and the Connecticut Police Officer Standards and Training Council (POSTC). The program was piloted through eight CCADV member domestic violence service agencies with 14 municipal law enforcement agencies. As of September 2016, the program has been expanded to include 18 CCADV member programs and 87 police departments, including the Connecticut State Police (CCADV, 2016).

The lethality assessment protocol emerged through pioneering research conducted by Jacquelyn Campbell in 1986 and the development of what is known as the Danger Assessment (DA) (Campbell, 2005). The initial 20 items on the DA were developed from the authors’ and others’ retrospective research studies of intimate partner homicide or serious injury from intimate partner violence (Berk, Berk, Loseke, & Rauma, 1983; Campbell, 1981) and from input provided by abused women in shelters (Stuart & Campbell, 1989). Then, the original 20-item questionnaire was revised as a result of a case control study in 12 cities (Campbell et al., 2003). Through the interpretation of data, the lethality assessment protocol was then reduced to 11 items and divided into two parts. In this revised version, if the victims respond yes to the first three questions, they are considered to be at high risk for lethality. However, if the victims answer no to the first three questions, but answer positively to four or more of the remaining eight questions, they are also considered high risk.

This intervention is intended to be brief, to educate the victim about their risk and risk factors, to provide some immediate safety planning information, and to encourage the victim to obtain services. In addition to the screening first responders complete on the scene, an advocate is available to speak with victims on the phone following the officers’ consultation. The advocate is aware of the victim’s responses to the questions on the assessment and can tailor their

suggested safety strategies accordingly. Self-determination is also a very important aspect of this process; the victims are able to refuse to answer any of the questions on the LAP and to speak to an advocate only if they choose to do so. Additionally, the LAP is considered an educational tool. Using the victim's responses and determining whether or not the individual is considered high risk, the officers can then educate the victim about their risk of homicide in an intimate relationship. Researchers have found that only 4% of domestic violence victims who were killed by their partners accessed services through domestic violence agencies prior to their deaths. Moreover, researchers also found that a little over half of women who survived serious murder attempts by their abusers did not realize the lethal jeopardy they were facing before the murder attempts (Klein, 2012).

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Diffusion research focuses on the conditions that increase or decrease the likelihood that members of a given culture will adopt a new idea or practice. Diffusion of innovation theory predicts that interpersonal contacts provide information and influence opinion and judgment. Studying how innovation occurs, E.M. Rogers (2003) argued that it consists of four stages: invention, diffusion (or communication) through the social system, time, and consequences. The information flows through networks, and then the specific nature of these networks, and the roles opinion leaders play in them, determine the likelihood that the innovation will be adopted.

Applying the theory to the LAP, which is our innovation, diffusion or communication from higher-ranking officers, such as the chief, lieutenant, or sergeant, to patrol level officers sets the tone of precedence for this protocol. If this diffusion is not positive, officers may not buy into or see the significance of the innovation, thus limiting success. Consequences of poor diffusion can include a lack of desire to implement the protocol or improper execution of the protocol, which can ultimately influence victim safety.

Furthermore, diffusion is spread from one police department to another; the best way for this to occur is by officers simply discussing the LAP and its benefits with their fellow officers. This type of diffusion can aid in the application of the LAP on a statewide level, and thereby positively impact victim contact at domestic violence calls. Conversely, poor diffusion, or negative talk pertaining to the innovation, can decrease the level of importance the LAP holds, as well as result in a negative impression of the protocol overall.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of the current exploratory study was to explore the attitudes and perceptions of law enforcement officers with regard to their utilization of LAP. Specifically, the researcher sought to document police officers' thoughts on the protocol and how they responded to the introduction of LAP in their departments. Moreover, the study considered whether this introduction included proper training and emphasis on the importance of the protocol. The researcher hypothesized that law enforcement officers would appreciate the benefit of LAP utilization and, therefore, be invested in LAP implementation.

The current study specifically aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What barriers, if any, impact the successful implementation of LAP and coordination of domestic violence services for victims of domestic violence?

2. What are the perceptions and attitudes of law enforcement officers utilizing LAP on their domestic violence calls?

METHODOLOGY

The current exploratory phenomenological research study, part of a multi-phase study being conducted in Connecticut, focused on police officers' attitudes and perceived barriers regarding implementation of the lethality assessment protocol (LAP) adopted by their departments. Qualitative inquiry provided the method for exploring this new trend in law enforcement efforts combating domestic violence homicides. The purpose of data collection was to explore and understand the lived experiences of each participant.

Sample

Convenience sampling was employed in this study. The researcher sent out emails to a variety of police departments throughout the state. Due to time constraints and the lengthy approval process with the police departments, the first four departments to respond became the participants studied in phase two of this larger research study. LAP liaisons recruited the specific participants and then coordinated dates and times with the researcher for focus groups. According to proper research protocol, the researcher was unaware of who was participating in the focus groups until the day of the meeting.

Although a convenience sampling method limits the transferability or the ability to generalize to the larger population concerning police attitudes and perceived barriers regarding LAP implementation, it does offer initial findings at this exploratory stage. Issues for consideration in evaluating threats to validity would include self-selection bias, especially for those police officers that have particularly strong views either for or against LAP.

In this explorative study, two major themes emerged: 1) LAP Implementation; and 2) Training. The second phase of the study consisted of a total of 27 officers participating in focus groups at four different police departments. Table 1 provides demographics of the four towns in this phase of the study, number of police officers in each town, demographics on the participating officers, and statistics on each department's lethality assessment screens.

Data Collection

The informed consent document was presented in written form and its purpose was discussed orally with each participant prior to the facilitation of each focus group. It was important to let the contributors know that their participation was voluntary and they were free to leave or not answer any of the questions being presented. Focus groups lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. In addition, the participants were informed that with their permission the interviews would be audio recorded, allowing dialogue to be analyzed verbatim. The researcher stressed the study's commitment to confidentiality and safety within the group and informed the subjects multiple times that all information shared would not be specifically identifiable to them or their department. Focus groups were conducted during a three-month period of time between January and March, 2016.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was completed through a course of steps utilizing the van Kaam method of analysis by Moustakas (1994). Each phase represents part of the journey taken to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of police officers and the work they do with domestic violence victims.

The first step in the analysis process involved manually transcribing the audio-recorded focus groups. Next, the demographic information obtained through the questionnaire was compiled and highlighted in Table 1. Step three was manual analysis of the data. While manual data analysis is very time consuming, it played a significant role in familiarizing the researchers with the data and, thereby, facilitating the identification of concepts and ideas shared between participants. Following the process of familiarization with the data, horizontalization was conducted. Moustakas (1994) states horizontalization is the process by which the researcher identifies every horizon or statement that is relevant to the topic of question as having equal value. This process of highlighting horizons in the focus group transcripts allowed connections to be made directly to the specific research questions being investigated. As themes emerged during the data collection and ultimately showed themselves through data analysis, the researchers determined that saturation had been met. Finally, throughout the last stage of the analysis process, the individual textural and structural descriptions were integrated into a narrative. The narrative included a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experiences within the phenomenon. The narrative process acted as a channel whereby the true meaning of the rich lived experiences of the phenomenon could be comprehended.

Participant Coding

The protection of participants' anonymity, privacy, and security was accomplished through the use of coded designators, which were assigned to each department and each participant for the duration of the research study. Each department was assigned one of the following codes: PD4, PD5, PD6, or PD7. Each participant was assigned a code which included their police department (i.e. PD4, PD5, PD6 or PD7) and a number (i.e. PD4-1 for police department 4 participant 1). The assigned coded designators remained static for each participant throughout the data collection and analysis process. In the end, none of the actual participants expressed concerns about the security of their personal identifying information, nor did they decline any interview questions or terminate participation during an interview.

FINDINGS

Provided in the below summary are textual descriptions supporting the themes. The semi-structured focus group process involved a free exchange of information based on 18 questions. To capture the essence of each focus group, the themes resulting from the 18 open-ended questions are detailed below. Table 2 presents the emergent themes derived from the participants involved in the focus groups, as well as the thematic definitions and the frequency of each theme discussed in each focus group.

Themes shared among police officers

Theme 1: LAP implementation. Police officers shared their perceptions of why the LAP is and is not being used effectively. From this discussion, three subthemes emerged: 1) victim blaming as a barrier, 2) liaison relationship with fellow officers and DV agency, 3) officer style regarding their approach to LAP implementation. All four of the participating police agencies mentioned this theme and its subthemes. Throughout the focus groups, the discussion centered a total of 26 times on this particular theme. PD4 participants commented 13 times, PD5 participants mentioned this theme 16 times throughout our discussion, PD6 referred to this theme seven times, and PD7 also mentioned it seven times throughout the conversation.

Subtheme 1: Victim blaming. Throughout the focus groups conducted, victim blaming was the first subtheme that emerged in the transcripts. All of the police departments included in the focus group had something to say about this subtheme. Below is a collection of responses associated with victim blaming:

I still think it [LAP] has the potential to be effective. However I've found on several calls when the officer hands the victim the phone to call the hotline or when we're asking them the questions and circling it, even when we explain we are not associated with anyone, we are the police department, these are the advocates who can help you, it's completely confidential, they [victims] don't believe us.

I feel as though they [victims] call because they want some calm in the dysfunction, while others are not the ones who call us at all, it is a neighbor or family member. You have some [victims] that don't want you to come and don't want you to make an arrest and it's like why did you even call us? Obviously you called for a reason and now we're here and you don't like the fact that we have to act upon your statements, so yeah in that aspect it's a little frustrating and I understand what it is. It's annoying when you think about the wasted time in theory that you're putting into this and nobody's using what your offering to them [victims].

More often than not, victims are blamed for their victimization. The idea of learned helplessness, pioneered by Leonora Walker (2009), can explain the behavior of battered women who stay in these relationships and also demonstrate the adaptive coping skills of these women. At this time, understanding the dynamics of domestic violence and the concept of battered women syndrome is not a normal part of law enforcement training. However, with more training and a deeper understanding of the issues associated with domestic violence relationships, officers may be able to better assist victims versus blaming them for their victimization.

Subtheme 2: Strong relationship between the police liaison and domestic violence agency. The LAP was developed to assist victims of domestic violence on the scene at the earliest moment of intervention; consequently, this assessment tool was also intended to build a stronger collaborative relationship between the police department LAP liaison and the local domestic violence agency. Throughout the focus groups, this relationship was pointed out by

PD7 an impressive 15 times. PD5 and PD6 mentioned this subtheme only once, and PD4 a mere three times. Highlights from PD7's focus groups are as follows:

We have a very good relationship with our DV agency contact. The agency sends a rep to our monthly meetings and we exchange information as well as deal with any issues. At the meetings we discuss cases, issues, and have taken the time to get to know their members, as they have taken the time to know the officers. They [DV agency] also provide us with stats about victims who have engaged in services, specifically the number of victims that month who have taken our information seriously and have gotten the help they needed.

I think LAP has definitely increased our communication and relationship with our local domestic violence agency. Because of that relationship, I have attended more trainings that have been offered through CCADV because the local agency will educate us [officers] on victim characteristics that I was never aware of, but that came through the strong bond our department now has with the agency. We [officers] have learned more about victims, how we can approach victims for more cooperation with our investigation and just an overall better understanding of DV. As officers we receive training related to the law enforcement aspect because that is our job, but as a first responder, it is also important for us to know how to make victims feel important and safe.

Interestingly, what became very obvious throughout the conversation about the relationship between the officers and the DV agency was how an officers style and ability to work with victims permeated the dialogue and then actually emerged as a third subtheme in the area of implementation of LAP.

Subtheme 3: Officer style. In his classic study of eight communities, James Q. Wilson (1968) identified three styles of policing. One of these styles, the service style, is strongly exhibited in many of the officer's responses throughout this study. The service style of policing is unmistakably linked to the "community policing" model and incorporates crime fighting with personal service that tailors police efforts based on local norms and individual's needs. This subtheme was mentioned a total of 26 times. PD4 mentioned it three times; PD5, five times; PD6, four times; and PD7 denoted it an impressive 14 times. PD7's vigorous regard for having an individual officer style that was welcoming and caring was obviously connected with their stance observed in subtheme 1. It truly shows the level of care and compassion officers in PD7 take when approaching domestic violence victims and utilizing LAP on their calls. Statements from the focus groups included:

The best tool we as officers have is our voice and our approach. I've always tried to treat victims as if I were responding to a female in my family. How would I want them to be treated? If I engage them in conversation, let them know what is happening every step of the way, be open about the process, why I am asking the questions, they're [victims] more open to answering my questions honestly, versus I start talking to them like a robot and like I don't care, they're just going to clam up on me and tell me nothing.

LAP has been a great tool for me to use to get the conversation about the seriousness of domestic violence across to the victims when we respond to their call. You go through the questions and it gives you a gauge of severity of their case, but more importantly it gives the victims an idea of how bad their relationship is, which is something most of them have not heard from someone else, or even heard themselves admit to out loud.

I have gotten victims who were very combative at first when I start to tell them why I need to ask them such personal questions, but as I explain and take the time to make them understand how important their answers are in keeping them safe, they calm down and begin to realize how serious their situation is and by the end of the interview, we have developed a stronger rapport and a deeper respect with one another. I have had victims call me after the fact and offer an apology for being so rude! I tell them all of the time, I understand how difficult this can be and take no offense, I just want to help.

Concluding, it was refreshing to hear a variety of officers understanding how important their role is in combating domestic violence and keeping victims safe. Unmistakably, officers' personal attitudes towards working with victims have a significant impact on the LAP's successful implementation.

This first major theme of implementation is closely tied to the second theme that emerged, that of training. Throughout the study there were departments who were very well trained and showed that level of instruction in their personal style and approach to working with domestic violence victims. However, on the other end of the spectrum, there were officers who were very clearly in need of additional training.

Theme 2: Training. Training is an extremely important aspect of the successful dissemination of any new protocol. It is necessary to have a strong training program to provide officers with the needed information and tools to successfully implement anything new, as well as to tighten the skills they may have learned previously. Instruction was mentioned in all four focus groups, however, for two completely different reasons. Half of the departments were very well taught, while the other half lacked even basic domestic violence training. Therefore, two divergent subthemes emerged within this category: 1) the police department was invested in providing excellent training experiences for their officers; 2) the police department has a need for ongoing training related to the overall frustrations associated with domestic violence calls and, particularly, with domestic violence victims. Training was mentioned a total of 31 times throughout the four focus groups. PD4 discussed this topic five times, PD5 a total of six times, PD6 mentioned it ten times, and finally PD 7, ten times.

Subtheme 1: Training investment. Training is an imperative concept in law enforcement. In addition, because the initial contact a domestic violence victim has with the criminal justice system is a deciding factor on whether or not they will continue to rely on law enforcement in the future, it is obvious that education specific to handling domestic violence calls and victims is critical. All of the police departments acknowledged this theme in their discussions; however, PD6 and PD7 significantly highlighted this area in their focus groups. A PD6 participant stated the following:

We put a large budget into training. There's a commitment to make sure the officers are well trained. That training directly relates to the ability to sell and make the LAP program successful for us. I always tell the officers, if there is a training you can sign up for or your sergeant can sign you up for, do it! It can't hurt!!!

Following up on these PD6 sentiments, PD7 also exhibited a robust commitment to training.

Training is very important in our department. When LAP came on board they didn't just give us a sheet and say, figure it out. We had a training, more than just a roll call training, and we were actually able to ask questions and we got comfortable with what LAP was intended to do for our domestic violence calls. I think we all asked the right questions and tried to troubleshoot any potential issues we may come across, then we went out and there was a trial by fire, we just helped each other out on it. We also continue to have ongoing training opportunities as well.

Surprisingly, PD4 and PD5 offered limited dialogue pertaining to this subtheme, yet they were very open about the need for additional training as mentioned in subtheme 2.

Subtheme 2: Need for ongoing training. Responding to domestic violence calls is not only dangerous, but can also be very frustrating. Police officers, like everyone around them, suffer from common biases about domestic violence and recognize the reality that many victims will return to their abusers several times before ending an abusive relationship. As a result, many police officers are undoubtedly frustrated, particularly when responding to couples with repeated calls to the police (Ruff, 2012). Without proper training, not only on policies and procedures related to domestic violence calls but also on the dynamics of domestic violence, many officers will develop burnout and potentially respond with the associated negative characteristics of impatience, frustration, and cynicism.

While officers are required to complete 15 hours of domestic violence training as a new officer, ongoing training is at the discretion of the department and at the ambition of the officer. PD4 and PD5 were very vocal about this subject. Some participants were confused on how LAP works and how it can impact their response to a domestic violence call:

I really don't know what it's supposed to do; I mean what do we do differently if there were no means for arrest that night. Sometimes just because if there is history regardless of how serious the call was that night, you might do the form even if you don't have to just to get an idea of what we're dealing with, but what is the difference how do we handle it differently? And then, we ask these questions at the end of our investigation, and they're [victims] like can we get this over and done with, seriously?! They're just so ready for us to get out of their homes.

PD5 shared the following regarding a need for additional training:

I honestly can't remember the training we did on LAP and it wasn't too long ago! I know it must have been in-house because I haven't attended a training in a long time and LAP has been being used for the last year. I don't know if there was an advocate present or not either. I believe we should review LAP now and obviously if there's more to it we should get trained on all aspects of LAP. While most of us [law enforcement officers] know that LAP is to connect victims with services, none of us know much more than that, and how to complete the form.

Moreover, the various officer styles, approaches to domestic violence, and vocalized regard or lack of regard for training could be seen in how the LAP was being implemented and the type of outcomes being achieved. This study demonstrates how implementation and training are vital to improving the results experienced by all those dealing with domestic violence calls.

DISCUSSION

Effective policing requires citizen cooperation. Domestic violence-related police calls have been found to constitute the single largest category of calls received by police, accounting for 15 to 50% of all 911-driven calls for police service (Stover, 2012). Incorporating police in advocacy and mental health partnerships is key to combatting domestic violence in our communities. The current study revealed that varying degrees of law enforcement buy-in take place regarding LAP, a new police intervention being conducted at domestic violence calls in Connecticut.

The findings of this study highlight several areas of strengths and concerns, including: 1) victim blaming, serving as a barrier to successful implementation of LAP, was evident in all police departments participating in this study; 2) varying degrees of training were being provided at the identified departments – some departments were clearly in need of additional training, while other departments truly accentuated their training; and 3) police department climate and culture became evident based on their relationships with the local domestic violence agencies as well as the individual officers' styles regarding domestic violence calls. Some departments exhibited how their officers utilize the service style to approach victims and provide genuine, nonthreatening assistance, and these departments' liaisons also developed a strong bond with the domestic violence agencies, which then resulted in more resilient and effective support for the community.

Training

Two of the four departments employed in this study offered exemplary training opportunities to their officers, and those opportunities were not just limited to LAP instruction. Because of the intensive emphasis on training at those two departments, the officers truly understand the value of the LAP and the full dynamics associated with domestic violence calls. In turn, these departments receive more victim cooperation and a higher level of LAP implementation and follow-through than the other two identified departments. The high level of training positively correlated with effective officer styles and a systematic approach to domestic violence.

Alternatively, the other two departments had significant issues related to the lack of proper LAP training, and this also became evident in their officers' styles and approaches to the

domestic violence victims. The success of their LAP implementation was diminished because of these two aspects, as expressed by the rate of victim refusal, documented in Table 1. Moreover, the majority of education conducted within these departments was only quick roll-call trainings, also known as briefings. These “trainings” were a maximum of fifteen minutes and conducted in a very chaotic environment. This method of instruction sends a message that the LAP may not be very important. In addition, more training on the basic tenants of domestic violence needs to be provided within these departments. Officer style and approach must be discussed in order to obtain maximum cooperation from victims and see successful outcomes through LAP utilization.

Collaboration

In January 2012, the *National Bulletin on Domestic Violence Prevention* led with a study entitled, “11 Reasons Why DV Homicides Reduced in DC, Maryland.” The story attributed a decline in domestic violence homicides by 50% in D.C. and 41% in Maryland over three years after police adopted a lethality assessment protocol to evaluate domestic violence incidents (“11 Reasons,” pg. 1). Coordinated community response programs and collaboration among a variety of criminal justice and community-based offender and victim social service agencies have been found to reduce reabuse (Juodis, Startomski, Porter, & Woodworth, 2014). The reductions in domestic violence associated with LAP use may simply demonstrate that paying attention to domestic violence, by almost any agency within the criminal justice system, makes the difference.

While none of the officers had anything negative to say about their local domestic violence agencies, two of the four departments did not have strong relationships with their partnered agencies. In order for LAP to truly be successful, it is necessary to have a solid association between law enforcement and domestic violence advocates. While the strongest connection is typically seen between the police liaison and the DV agency liaison, this most basic bond was barely evident within these two departments. Perhaps if this relationship was improved, the amount of victim LAP refusal would decline.

Department Climate/Culture

Over the past 45 years, much has changed concerning the manner in which police do their jobs. Throughout the course of their careers, police officers may develop specific ways of reacting to certain types of cases and individuals, including domestic violence victims. A study conducted by Johnson (2011) found that officer attitudes are significant predictors of their work behaviors and this behavior can directly impact their service delivery. The current study highlights this tenant, specifically, with the two departments who conducted extensive training with their officers and invested deeply in their professional development. These officers felt supported and that endorsement was evident in their policing style and service delivery in the field. On the other hand, the departments that did not emphasize training and professional development had officers who expressed a definite lack of buy-in and felt a lack of encouragement from their departments.

Furthermore, the officers’ general attitudes about domestic violence and domestic violence calls can play a significant role in the department’s overall domestic violence culture. One department stated, “domestic violence is the central focus of our department,” while another stated, “domestic violence calls are the most frustrating calls we deal with because we all know

the victim will never leave their abuser.” This departmental culture surrounding domestic violence can make or break the implementation of a new protocol. While personal beliefs about domestic violence can affect an officer’s response to a victim, the department culture and climate appear to play an even greater role in this dynamic.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has several methodological limitations – the first being the use of convenience sampling. The sample was not random, nor representative. Utilizing a larger random sample could provide greater generalizability. Secondly, the use of focus groups may have impeded participant honesty while responding to the posed questions. Conducting individual interviews can provide a more confidential environment which would be more conducive for such personal discussions. Furthermore, while this study is part of a multiphase study, department demographics and location were not taken into consideration. Location is a key factor as it directly correlates to the domestic violence agency that works with each police department. The analysis may have presented different themes if all departments with similar descriptors and locations were compared.

Given these limitations, research that is more extensive needs to be conducted to get an accurate and comprehensive depiction of officers’ perceived barriers and attitudes regarding the LAP. Validity procedures that include triangulation and prolonged engagement and observation would offer rigor in terms of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lub, 2015).

CONCLUSION

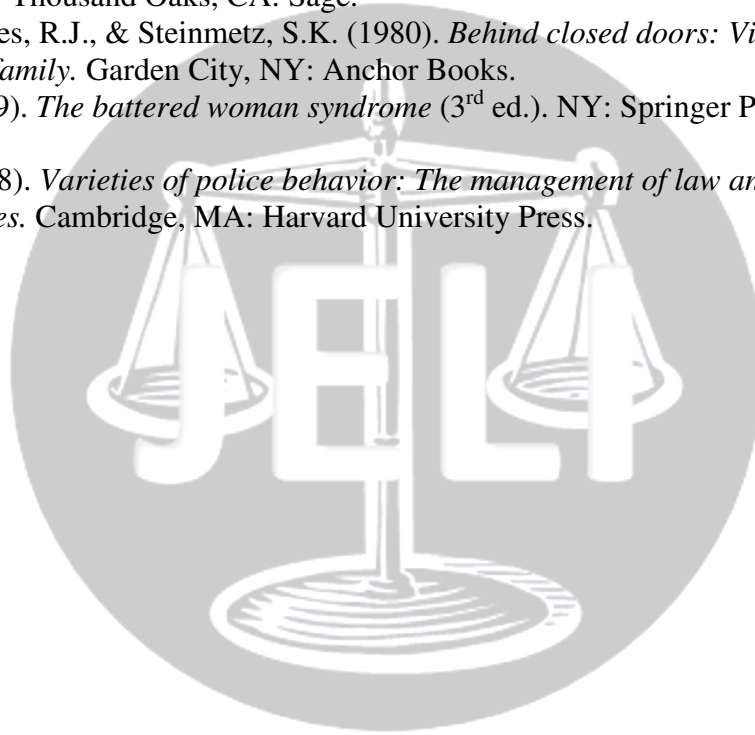
In conclusion, through this current study, the data has identified areas where improvements to the implementation of the LAP and coordination of domestic violence services can be made, as well as where police departments are doing great things to combat domestic violence in their communities. By utilizing a training regimen from the police departments that already focus on domestic violence, departments deficient in this training can also start to see abundant results through the utilization of the LAP. The potential of LAP is limitless, as seen by our neighbors in Maryland and Washington D.C., and with proper training and implementation, Connecticut can also have great success in the plight to decrease domestic violence fatalities in our communities.

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APPENDIX

Table 1.
Demographics and Lethality Assessment Protocol Statistics for 2015

Police Departments	4	5	6	7
Town Demographics ¹				
Population	59,562	20,732	60,477	17,791
Race				
White	91.27%	94%	87%	92.1%
Hispanic	4.47%	3%	9%	7.3%
African-American	1.46%	<1%	3%	3.4%
Asian	4.42%	3%	1%	1.9%
Other	2.81%	1%	3%	
Median Age ²	41	39	40	42
Number of Police Officers (as of 2013)	110	51	122	35
Study Participants				
Focus Group Size(N)	8	4	12	3
Race				
White	100%	75%	75%	100%
Hispanic	0%	0%	0%	0%
African- American	0%	0%	25%	0%
Asian	0%	0%	0%	0%
Other	0%	25%	0%	0%
Median Age (SD)	41.5 (3.3)	34.5 (6.2)	37.5 (8.7)	41.7 (5.1)
Mean Years as Police Officer (SD)	17.3 (4.3)	8.0 (5.8)	11.4 (8.0)	17.0 (5.3)
Lethality Assessment Protocol Statistics 2015				
	PD 4-FF <i>M</i> (SD)	PD 5-D <i>M</i> (SD)	PD 6-B <i>M</i> (SD)	PD 7-P <i>M</i> (SD)
Lethality Screens	4.6 (2.9)	1.6 (1.8)	17.8(8.1)	9.8 (4.4)
High Danger Cases	2.0 (1.5)	.067 (0.8)	7.8(4.8)	4.7 (2.4)
Officer Calls to Domestic Violence Agency	1.3 (1.4)	0.5 (0.8)	6.8(5.5)	4.7 (2.2)
Victim Refusal	0.3 (0.5)	0.1 (0.3)	1.5(3.2)	.1 (0.3)
Victim Refusal Rate	5.45%	5.26%	8.5%	.85%

¹Source: Connecticut Economic Resource Center, Inc. (CERC) 2013 figures

²Median age as reported by CER

Table 2. Themes and Definitions

Main Themes	Definitions
LAP Implementation	How police officers are disseminating LAP to victims; perceived barriers; reasons for success.
Victim blaming as a barrier	Victims either refuse to answer the LAP questions or they refuse to speak to an advocate if they screen in as high risk.
Liaison relationship with fellow officers and DV agency	How strong or weak the relationship is between the two agencies as well as within agencies and how it relates to LAP implementation.
Officer style regarding their approach to LAP implementation	Way in which officer approaches LAP with victims, how LAP is introduced and explained.
Training	Level of training presented to officers on LAP; overall domestic violence training; importance of providing quality training to officers.
Training Investment	Department has a significant training budget; committed officers focused on providing ongoing training opportunities.
Need for ongoing training	Training needs to be broadened to focus on basics of DV; reasons for repeat calls, typical victim reactions to law enforcement interventions; general tenant of LAP.